

asemic writing: recent history and ongoing research
jim leftwich

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Jim Leftwich, Jan 27, 1998 (to Tim Gaze):
A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemantic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning.

Tim Gaze
preface to The Oxygen of Truth
The word "asemic" means "having no semantic content."
November, 1999

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from Wikipedia
Asemantic writing is a wordless open semantic form of writing.
The word asemantic means "having no specific semantic content".

1) Asemantic writing is a wordless open semantic form of writing.
When did asemantic writing become wordless?
Who made the decision?
Why was it important for this kind of writing to be without words?
Does the person who made this decision know that the definition is historically inaccurate?

2) The word asemantic means "having no specific semantic content".
When did the word "specific" get added to this definition?
Who made the decision to add it?
Why was it important that the semantic content not be specific?
In this context, how is asemantic writing different from polysemous writing, or ambiguous writing?
Would it not be more accurate to define "asemic" as "having no semantic content"?

Jim Leftwich
07.09.2015

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Google Groups, ASEMIC

On Fri, Jun 10, 2011 at 12:38 PM, Jim Leftwich <jimle...@gmail.com> wrote:

there is no such thing as asemic writing.
in fact, there is no such thing as asemic anything.
everything is readable, ie., can be and will be given meaning.
the asemic is an unattainable ideal.
in striving toward it, many mutations of writing and drawing (and other practices: photographing,
to name but one) will come into being.
this is the value of the asemic.
working with asemia (attempting to write it, attempting to read and/or not read it) is a training
exercise, and the products of that training exist as documentation of the process.

On Sat, Jun 11, 2011 at 9:31 AM, Jim Leftwich <jimle...@gmail.com> wrote:

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- > if this theorizing and defining project is successful asemia will disappear into text.
- > this may have already happened.
- > my strategy for protecting the asemic is to deny its existence.

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Why we continue using the term asemic writing, even though there is no such thing:

i think all human experience has semantic content.
that's why i think asemic writing is a kind of aspirational writing.
we aspire to create an asemic writing, a writing without semantic content.
and we fail.
so we try again, and fail again.
if we genuinely care about the practice, we repeat this process over and over, for a long time.
eventually, we lose all hope of achieving our goal.
we lose faith in the goal.
we no longer believe in our ability to create an asemic writing.
so we decide upon an alternative goal.
we decide the process has never been about the product, the object, the poem. it has always
been only about the process.
it has always been about the process of training the mind, perhaps of quieting the mind (to
borrow a phrase from John Cage).
it is a writing against itself, and more than that, a writing against the self.
that is how it can be compared to a spiritual discipline, like zazen or hesychasm, or zerufe otiot.
[also transliterated as tzeruf otivot]
that is why standards of aesthetic quality are worse than irrelevant to the process.
and, that is also why a hierarchy of practitioners is worse than irrelevant in this context.

Jim Leftwich
April 2015

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Jim Leftwich

We can read things that are not written. We can be frustrated in our attempts to read things that are not written. But we gain nothing and learn nothing by choosing to call things that are not written asemic writing. We look at the sand on a beach, or the bark on a tree, or the ripples in a stream, and we can if we wish say that we are reading what we are looking at, or that we are unable to read what we are looking at, even though in some ways it reminds us of writing, but it does not become writing if we take a photograph of it, it only becomes a photograph, and it does not become writing if we make a rubbing or an imprint, it only becomes a rubbing

I took this kind of procedural experimentation and added to it a subjective, processual stage of associational improvisation. One source text could provide the initial conditions, so to speak, for the generation of a long series of derivative texts.

Therefore, then and now: no such thing as asemic writing, only a kind of unattainable goal posited as a source of energy for our ongoing textual mutations.

My first explorations of quasi-calligraphic faux writing came the morning after a particularly intense experience of taking what Terence McKenna called a "heroic dose" of psilocybin mushrooms. I had experienced a complete annihilation of the self, and not one of merging harmoniously with the universe, rather one of being ripped apart, as if in a ritual sparagmos. The next morning i was sitting in my car and i started for the first time to write lines of illegible fake writing. It felt as if i were being guided to do this, as a kind of healing for the night before. When i sent some of these pages to John Bennett for LAFT he called them "spirit writings". I had no argument with that name. Later Tim Gaze published a book of them with that title. My contribution to the recent Anthology of Asemic Handwriting is taken from that book, in response to a request from Tim.

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The contemporary practice known as Asemic writing emerged in the late 1990s from a logical, step-by-step process of continually pushing the boundaries of experimental poetry. I know. I was there. What I offer here is only a brief description. For anyone interested in more detail I recommend the Rare Books and Manuscripts Archives at Ohio State University. The process begins of course with the intact word, the integrity of which had long ago been violated in favor of the syllable. If the word can be broken down to its syllabic components, then

it can also be broken down to its letteral components. This had been accomplished as early as 1909, by Marinetti and the Italian Futurists. If the word can be broken down to its letteral components, then it can also be broken down to the lines and shapes of the letters themselves. This area of exploration/experimentation led, in the late 1990s, to a practice of quasi-calligraphic improvisation. Research by Tim Gaze quickly uncovered ancestors for this practice, most importantly Henri Michaux, Christian Dotremont, and Brion Gysin. The first collections of asemic writing in its current configuration were published by Tim Gaze in his Asemic Magazine (1998 - 2007). You can find it archived here: <http://asemic-magazine.blogspot.com/> Unfortunately, at least to my way of thinking, in recent years the work with the word-syllable-letter has been largely abandoned in favor of quasi-calligraphic practices and various forms of abstract art. The struggle with writing, in writing, as writing doesn't seem to be a very important part of what is happening under the umbrella of the word "asemic" today. What attracted me to the notion of asemia circa 1997 was my experience of it as a kind of aspirational writing-against-itself. There is no such thing as asemic writing, but in struggling towards it one might find oneself doing and thinking things the experience of which would be unavailable without this specific practice. That's why it is important. As a means of producing aesthetic objects it really has no importance whatsoever.



comments posted to Asemic Writing: The New Post-Literate Facebook Group
August 13, 2015

Jim Leftwich i don't think i have seen the expression "post-asemic writing" before. but now that i see it it has the look of an inevitability. everyone who has ever had any interest in asemic writing should welcome this. the next phase of the anti-movement is here.

Jim Leftwich asemic writing is more interesting to me now that it has led to something called post-asemic writing. the concept of asemic writing needed this development. it is a very welcome breath of fresh air.

Jim Leftwich i started using the word pansemic about 12 years ago. it was important to me then, but i'm no longer quite so strongly attached to it. for a lot of folks it's a relatively new notion, or at least a relatively new word. i've used it a lot, and thought about it a lot, and frankly i've grown a little tired of it (or maybe i just don't have much energy to put towards its defense). i still get a lot of energy out of the notion of asemic writing, in all of its permutations. i still use it as a kind of

writing-against-itself. it's a very generative concept. it is also a lot of fun -- to do, to think about, and even at times to write about. i'm going to continue to have fun with it. i would like to think that everyone involved with it will do the same.

Jim Leftwich asemic writing is part of what i do as a poet. the idea of pansemia came out of that process, as i gradually became convinced that there is no such thing as asemic writing (which, as i have said elsewhere, is not a reason to quit working on it). for me, post-asemic writing will fit in quite nicely on this continuum. the notion can continue to evolve as a kind of writing-against-itself, without the danger of becoming any kind of visual art.



A Brief Bible of Defiant Reading

(originally published in xtant 4, Charlottesville / Oysterville, 2004)

the human eye is quicker than a chinese hopping spider. thus in reading the eye traverses the terraced chasms of the tao.

“give a man a fish and he will work all day. teach him to fish and he will eat you for lunch.”
—chairman lao tzu

type moves at the speed of ink through sinews and fibers or at the speed of arithmetic among binary ephemera thus slowing the organic antics of the eye, which eases us ever closer to the momentous inertia of human culture.

reading is a process of disassembling the collapsible ideology of one's local ecology. meaning is constructed through the labored disassembling of an osmotic aggregate.

the nimble fragility of the eye encourages in reading a conflation of subtlety with subjectivity and is perceived as a threat to the lucrative comfort zones of the holy socius.

when reading mercurial recounts of corporate tenacity and political autochthony the eye everts in a slow implosion and oozes against the synapses like ink from a frozen octopus.

images should be read as molten and bloated letterstrings from the secret text hidden in plain view. an image is a scrap of text offering itself on the inedible scale of maximum human aggrandizement. this is why humans tend to sleep through their dreams.

as a lunar moth is to an Epson Stylus 880 color printer, so also is the human eye to a keyboard before a screen. if the printer is beneath a lamp, as it should be, then the eye is like a butterfly, also as it should be, and the passage from screen to sheet is but a moment's blink.

"a fish in the eye is worth two in the boot." —Sir Jesus of Christmas

"the letters are alien sperm." —Acidophilus Kuttner (Antwerp, 1460)

the aphorism drawn taut connects the horizon to its etymon : an it harm no man, read what thou wilt.

08.01.04

Jim Leftwich

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[published in ASEMIA, Anabasis/Xtant, 2003)

singing the flat opaque. each letter a thicket of vines distinctly our moan and squeak, copse into which the rabbit flops grinning from ear to ear, wrung through a wavy grid. ornament is the oldest tradition of every surface. an ornament in isolation, or in any context other than its own, is a glyph, primordial aura around the priority of speech, and prior to that the embryonic phonemes of the hunt, vocables of sex and harvest. the letters entered through the eyes as birds' feet and broken trees and their birds built nests in the forks of the tongue. an asemic glyph is everything other than a return to the thing recalled, thus its campanulate kinship with the syllable, its stylistic refusal of the word, even as the letters revolt, serfs wielding their serifs like swords words worlds collapse into their opacity, unless we chance to sing them in defiance of azoic intent. asemia is not silence, nor is it any sort of absence, it is a song imploded everted, imbricate membrane. our words belong to our discarded calendars, to a childhood of astrology earlier than Eleusis, or to the murder of Kennedy and planes flying into towers. we want our words to transmute into glyphs, easier to thread a camel through the last straw in a haystack, than to transmute these

glyphs back into words. glyphs live in the future, gandharvas across a bardo, we coax glimpsed sound from memory of things to come. in its purest form, a syllable is a vowel. much the same can be said for the singularity of a glyph. in the company of words glyphs cloak themselves in surface, and hide their songs like vowels inside a sentence. they gaze out at the reader like mute ornamental gargoyles. we read around them, shy and tedious, like the broken image of an elf. pixies among their pylons juggle our refuse and cavort for the surveillance cameras. they build pueblos of basalt at the base of the brain. dreams sweat feathery purr of missiles. polyphonic medulla sex in the gaps of signs.

10.27.03

Jim Leftwich

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subjective asemic postulates

(originally published in ASEMIC THEORIES, by Andrew Topel, Annihilator Press, Australia, 2003)

as one route through the experiential, a moment encountered as encoded information is decoded in the sensorium to a biosemiotic aggregate subsequently reencoded as language. at this distance, twice-removed, we find ourselves cognizant of our own experiences. human commonality in the sense of its social utility is predicated upon the assurance of subjective experience having become relatively homogenous through its encipherment in shared language. as one route through this encipherment, we might posit as its root components the recognizable variations on the standard shapes ascribed to a set of alphabeticals used in its written depiction. another, related route would investigate the sounds evoked under normative conditions by this same set of alphabeticals. by mutating the standard alphabetical forms, asemic writing destabilizes the encipherment at the site of its visible construction. asemic writing necessitates processes of navigation and decipherment only analogous to normative reading strategies. reading becomes recombinative, recuperative, and improvisational, in direct transgression of normative linguistic homogeneity, opening to a reconstituted subjectivity of experience within language. a strictly semiotic system is reconfigured as asemic when subjectivity assumes primacy for its interpretive elaboration. one effect of this is to introduce the seductive fallacy of having returned to an origin or immediacy, as if the act of destabilizing a human code could erase the human factor from a continual dialectic of the coded, the decoded,

and the reencoded. destabilization of the alphabeticals disables received strategies of reading, thus opening the asemic text to interpretive experiences outside the set of acceptable interactions as reading. consensus reality is not communicable by an asemic field. structural censorship constraining the spectrum of permissible experience is not enforceable within an asemic field. hierarchical stratifications of the dominant culture, delineating slots and roles for authorities and subalterns, are available only as transparently arbitrary constructions within an asemic field. the asemic text offers an alternative subjectivity, a site for extrapolations of the experiential, in direct opposition to any homogenous template sanctioned in the diminished capacities of socially- and linguistically-constructed identities. the asemic writer extends an openness, an absence, to the reader. as one route through this absence, we might posit the provisional reinvention of reading as a radical extrapolation of subjective experience. nomadic reading strategies along the rhizome of the asemic insinuate fractal basins for the anarchic subject.

02.27.03

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ex nihilo ad absurdum

jim leftwich

(originally published in Pulsing Swarms & Squiggly Diagonals, 8 Page Press, Espoo, Finland, 2005)

ts'ao-shu — "draft script", or "grass script"

k'uang ts'ao-shu — "crazy grass script"

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Robert Duncan — "The freedom of the individual lies in his institution of anarchy where before he was sole ruler."

Sandra Jeppesen — "Anarchy is about cultural production."

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there are no masters of prepared pen calligraphy. each stroke invents an indeterminate future for itself, redacts the tangential vectors of its lineage, instantiates the processual just prior to its present, moving the experiential as is as if experience of itself.

posit and deposit, ink doubling against offhand occlusion, wrapt mirrors reverse prestidigitation, to prophesy the faceted contexts of a revisionist ahistory. recursive loops inscripted evolve a past of fractal basins.

start with a sharpie. steal it from the imagined museum of a nameless workers' collective, it will have been the improvisational compass for their *dérive*. continue with a knife: archaic emblem of between, glyph for the phase transitions in a dialectical carnival of subversions.

it is the hand and the breath, the chair and the desk, the time of day and a matter of scale. if the heart was the size of a moon it would see the earth's rotation and hear its orbital song, this leaks into the hand and oils the slippage, wrapped recursive mirrors, the pen praying among itself in pagan glossolalia. subatomic orbits inside each synapse infect our thoughts with timeless void, invisible rainbows drip like angels from a bestial tongue.

carving the pen: too much attention contaminates the surface with a discontinuous logic, the logarithmic reproduction of imitative failures. attend to the inscrutability of the pen's facticity. allow the blade to whisper along each edge, sensuous and sinuous. forget the ancient stories, and remember not to replace them. the serpent never sleeps. at the center of the sign is its absence, signifying against the science of silence.

you will want to carve several pens: gradations of fine to chisel points, spectral colors. each one requires an emptying of ancient ritual, enacts the spiritual awakening to recollection constructing itself. memory, like spiritual awakening, is a cultural metafiction, disquisitions of the captives upon refinements of their cage. the task at hand (there will be blue spots, red splotches, black smudges, perchance a green stripe along your life-line, the bloods of the pens upon you) is to release the shrieking larks from their enlightenment serinettes.

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misdirections through lineage & context:

John Cage — "I decided that what was wrong was not me but the piano. I decided to change it."

Jean Dubuffet — "I have the impression, language is a rough, very rough stenography, a system of algebraic signs very rudimentary, which impairs thought instead of helping it." —
"Written language seems to me a bad instrument. As an instrument of expression, it seems to

deliver only a dead remnant of thought, more or less as clinkers from the fire. As an instrument of elaboration, it seems to overload thought and falsify it."

Jean Dubuffet — "I declare that every phase of the natural world (and the intellectual world is of course included), every part of every fact — mountains or faces, movements of water or forms of beings — are links in the same chain, and all proceed from the same key, and for this reason I declare that the forms of screaming birds which appear on my ink-spotted page have the same source as real birds, just as the gestures I reveal in those same spotted pages, the glance which shines from one place, the laughing face which appears in another, are the result of mechanisms which produce these same gestures, glances, laughs, elsewhere, and are almost real gestures, real glances, are in any case their cousins, or, if homologues are preferred — abortions, unsuccessful aspirations."

Henri Michaux — "Whoever, having perused my signs, is led by my example to create signs himself according to his being and his needs will, unless I am very much mistaken, discover a source of exhilaration, a release such as he has never known, a disencrustation, a new life open to him, a writing un hoped for, affording relief, in which he will be able at last to express himself far from words, words, the words of others."

Richmond Browne's letter to Jerry Coker, in *Improvising Jazz*:

"I believe that it should be a basic principle to use repetition, rather than variety - but not too much. The listener is constantly making predictions; actual infinitesimal predictions as to whether the next event will be a repetition of something, or something different. The player is constantly either confirming or denying these predictions in the listener's mind. As nearly as I can tell, the listener must come out right about 50% of the time - if he is too successful in predicting, he will be bored; if he is too unsuccessful, he will give up and call the music 'disorganized'.

Thus if the player starts a repetitive pattern, the listener's attention drops away as soon as he has successfully predicted that it is going to continue. Then, if the thing keeps going, the attention curve comes back up, and the listener becomes interested in just how long the pattern is going to continue. Similarly, if the player never repeats anything, no matter how tremendous an imagination he has, the listener will decide that the game is not worth playing, that he is not going to be able to make any predictions right, and also stops listening. Too much difference is sameness: boring. Too much sameness is boring - but also different once in a while."

Jean Dubuffet— "From the very outset, the very question of madness must be rethought since, all things considered, it has hardly any criteria other than the social." — "The notion of psychotic art is absolutely false! Psychiatrists emphasize it because they wish to believe they are in a position to differentiate, to tell who is sane and who isn't." — "I believe that the creation of art is intimately linked to the spirit of revolt. Insanity represents a refusal to adopt a view of reality that is imposed by custom. Art consists in constructing or inventing a mirror in which all of the

universe is reflected. An artist is a man who creates a parallel universe, who doesn't want an imposed universe inflicted on him. He wants to do it himself. This is a definition of insanity. The insane are people who push creativity further than professional artists, who believe in it totally."

Jean Dubuffet — "We can only rid ourselves of the Western bourgeois caste by unmasking and demystifying its phony culture. It serves everywhere as this caste's weapon and the Trojan horse."

Sandra Jeppesen — "Anarchy is a struggle for the present moment."

Stephen Drury — "The first task in writing for the prepared piano is the selection and placement of the preparations, building a palette of pings, thumps, and drum and gong-like noises, with hints of microtones lying between the cracks of the keyboard, often a single sustained pitch ringing on after an initial burst of noise. The creation of a piece thus begins with a choice of materials rather than a theme or motif (or even a twelve-tone row). Each prepared note takes on an autonomous character, like a chord or harmony complete in itself. Composition then becomes the act of ordering and combining these previously chosen sound-objects, rather than creating melodies and harmonies out of the available pitches."

Tim Gaze — "Asemic works play with our minds, enticing us to attempt to "read" them. Some asemic works make the viewer hover between "reading" (as a text) and "looking" (as a picture). This is a very interesting state. They form a bridge between art and writing. In Chinese culture, poetry, painting and calligraphy are deemed to be closely related arts. Here is a Western analogue."

11.29.04



Jim Leftwich

Useless Writing

(originally published in Things Rescued From Eternal Non-Existence, xtantbooks, charlottesville, 2001. also published in ANOTHER SOUTH, University of Alabama Press, 2002)

Skills are acquired behaviors, similar to acquired tastes. They are learned behaviors valued by the dominant culture to the extent that it can use them. Different areas of the dominant culture value different skills. Skill is developed originally, jump-started if you will, through training, then honed, refined, through experience, through practice, the practice of the particular skill. One sets out to learn a skill, seeks out an expert in the field, and is trained by rote and through information until one has acquired the desired skill. It is the same whether one wishes to repair an automobile engine or write a sonnet, program a computer or paint a portrait. There is a hierarchy at work here, and those who reside at the highest levels do so due to their possession of a specialized knowledge and their mastery of its requisite activities: the arcanum and its secret gestures: the gnosis and its rites. Almost all of us can learn almost any skill if we desire to do so. All that is required is the desire and the work, the desire and the willingness to put in the time and put forth the effort to acquire the skill. All the skills that are taught, and the ways in which they are taught, are structurally necessary to the culture that teaches them, else they would not be taught. We should think of this usefulness as meaning only one thing: useful means useful to the dominant culture, always and only. That which is deemed useful is such only insofar as it reinforces the fundamental structure of the culture. The power relations that are structurally in place must remain structurally in place. Change is not only allowed, it is required, but only in the details of the larger pattern; the larger pattern of necessity must remain intact.

What happens if one desires to practice useless skills, skills that are not useful in maintaining the structure of the culture? First of all, one will not be able to acquire these skills in the usual manner. There will be no teachers provided by the culture; no training will be available. One's desire will of necessity need be nearly an obsession. The work, the time and effort required, may seem disproportionate to the desire. One will likely decide to pursue some other skill, to alter one's desire, to attune one's desire to those regarded as useful by the culture.

What happens if one persists in the pursuit of useless skills? It is unlikely that an entirely unforeseen activity will be invented, so one will work in the shadows of an already established tradition. But, at least at the outset, one will work alone, without guides or guidelines. The wheel will likely be reinvented accidentally and often. (Reinventing the wheel is useful in the pursuit of useless skills.) But the wheel is not a part of the desire, so it will be discarded — discarded not as useless, but as useful, therefore inappropriate to the pursuit. One trains by sorting and wandering, sifting, brooding, drifting, gathering and discarding, always discarding. This is a nomadic pursuit, not necessarily directionless or circuitous, but always everything but the steady step along a straight and narrow path. This is the crooked path, and its passage is along the low road.

This autodidact will learn to do things that others have no desire to do, that others are not allowed to do, that others are not able to think of doing. This is obvious from the outside looking in, but only acknowledged by the dominant culture in moods of elitist condescension. The normative reaction of the dominant culture will be derision or a haughty indifference. Structural superiority, however, permits itself the privilege of praising from a position of ignorance. This is a

method that attempts to appropriate the useless. A cursory glance at recent cultural history in America alone reveals several instances of this. There is only one way around this: if one is truly committed to the practice of useless skills, one must be constantly on guard against one's own tendencies towards usefulness.

Two useless skills:

1. private writing, by which I mean writing that has a strictly subjective significance for the writer. this writing may be appropriated by the dominant culture, i.e. published, sold, archived, studied, etc., but it cannot be known for what it is. a writer's disciplined practice of private writing can only be known as such by that writer. other knowledge concerning it will never be other than ancillary.

2. asemic writing, by which I mean writing that is shifted intentionally towards the unreadable, towards image, without discarding entirely all vestiges of either the letter or the line, and without assuming the alternative status of visual art. it is a hybrid writing, a writing not meant for a reading mingled with an imaging not meant for looking. it is a useless, mutant writing, its uselessness a mutagen for the writer.

3.12.01

jim leftwich is a poet and networker who lives in Roanoke, Va. he is the author of *Dirt*, *Doubt*, *Spirit Writing*, *Death Text*, *Six Months Aint No Sentence*, and many other titles. collaborative works include *Sound Dirt*, with John M. Bennett, *Book of Numbers*, with Marton Koppany, *Stories & Puzzles*, with Bill Beamer, and *Acts*, with John Crouse. he has been involved in small press publishing since 1994 (editing and publishing *Juxta*, *Juxta/Electronic*, *Xtant*, *xtantbooks*, *antboo*, and *Textimagepoem*.) since 2010 he has been editor and publisher of the micropress, *TLPress*, specializing in tacky little pamphlets, broadsides, pdf ebooks, and related ephemera. since 2008 he has been involved in organizing mail art, fluxus, sound poetry, visual poetry and noise events in Roanoke.